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THE WORK OF THE GROUP OF EXPERTS ON THE PROGRAMME OF WORK

Report by the Chairman of the Group of Experts

1. Since the fifty-fourth session of the Commission, the Group of Experts on the Programme of Work (GEPW) has focussed on three main issues: the regional preparatory meeting on Beijing plus five, the Medium Term Plan, and biennialization. In addition, the Chairman of the GEPW was invited to attend meetings with the Bureaux of two PSBs to discuss the application of the guidelines on prioritization, which had been agreed by the Commission at its fifty-fourth session in May 1999.

I. Beijing Plus Five

2. The Regional Preparatory Meeting on Beijing plus five (January 2000) was an enormous task for the ECE secretariat. The GEPW acted as a consultative group during the preparatory process, ensuring that member States were kept fully informed of developments. The success of the meeting was self-evident, and thanks are to be given to all those, including staff in the ECE secretariat, who invested their energy and enthusiasm in the event. The preparatory process was, in retrospect, a clear example of close collaboration between the secretariat and Geneva based experts.

II. Medium Term Plan

3. In November 1999, the secretariat provided the GEPW with the draft of the Medium Term Plan for its intergovernmental review before submission to UN Headquarters. There was little discussion, and the GEPW expressed its general agreement with the draft.

III. Biennialization

4. The GEPW was given a mandate by the Commission at its fifty-fourth session to reconsider the question of biennialization. The Chairman of the GEPW held informal consultations with a number of member States and with the secretariat, from which he determined that the biennialization of Commission sessions would not be in the best interests of the ECE at the present time. Resource savings would be negligible, and the profile of ECE's activities would be likely to suffer. Those informal consultations further led the Chairman to conclude that, instead of biennializing the Commission sessions, it would be better to consider what constructive improvements could be made to the format of the Annual Session, to ensure that it is more relevant, interesting and productive for member States. Improving the Annual Session may, in itself, produce some of the time and resource benefits which some member States think would accrue from biennialization.

5. The Chairman discussed his findings with the GEPW, which agreed that the issue of biennialization should be taken off the agenda. The GEPW further agreed that the Annual Session could benefit from various improvements in its format. One example mentioned was the possibility of slightly reducing the length of the session. Experts were asked to consult their capitals for constructive ideas which, after agreement by the GEPW, could be submitted to an Ad Hoc Informal Meeting of the Commission later this year.

IV. Prioritization

6. This year also saw the implementation of the revised guidelines on prioritization, which were agreed by the Commission at its fifty-fourth session. One of the agreed recommendations was that the Chairman (or a representative) of the GEPW should attend meetings of the PSB Bureaux to discuss the revised process. Feedback from the Bureau meetings so far attended has been positive: there had been few difficulties in compiling the proforma as requested. The Chairman took the opportunity to remind the PSBs that the proforma would not be used automatically to redistribute resources between the various PSBs: resource redistribution would only take place if member States thought it necessary. Neither would PSBs be told what to do with their resources.

V. 2000/2001

7. In the year ahead, the Group of Experts on the Programme of Work will, if so mandated by the Commission, consider improvements to the format of the Annual Session. It will also be required to consider the budget narrative before submission to New York at the end of the year, and may convene as a consultative group to discuss initial preparations for the ECE Ministerial Meeting on Ageing, which is due to take place in Berlin in 2002.

VI. Recommendation

8. There is one recommendation requiring endorsement by the Commission. This is that:

> "In deciding that biennialization would not be in the best interests of the ECE at the present time, the Commission requests the Group of Experts on the Programme of Work to consider whether any improvements should be made to the format of the Annual Session of the Commission; any recommendations arising from such deliberations should be submitted to an Ad Hoc Informal Meeting of the Commission later in the year."